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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL (CASTILLE)

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TAGS: PREF PHUM PREL EG IS SU

SUBJECT: EGYPT DENIES REFOULEMENT OF SUDANESE RETURNED FROM ISRAEL, CLAIMS GROUP WAS RELEASED

REF: A. 2007 CAIRO 3516

1B. 2007 CAIRO 3238

1C. 2007 CAIRO 2816

Classified by Minister Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Refugees Tarek El Maaty told us on February 12 that in late December 2007, Egypt had released the group of 48 African migrants that Israel had returned to Egypt in August 2007 after they illegally crossed the Sinai border into Israel, and that none had subsequently been deported to Sudan. El Maaty claimed that sporadic violent altercations on the border have intimidated would-be border crossers, tracking with UNHCR information that fewer registered Sudanese refugees or asylum-seekers are making the attempt. The GoE continues to worry that Sudanese in Egypt could be a potential source of social instability, and is seeking ways to support repatriation of South Sudanese. End summary.

Group of 48 Released, MFA Claims No Refoulement

12. (SBU) On February 12, MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Refugees Tarek El Maaty told us that in late December 2007, Egypt had released the group of 48 African, mostly Sudanese, migrants that Israel had returned to Egypt in August 2007 after they illegally crossed the Sinai border into Israel (ref C). El Maaty had previously refused to confirm or deny press reports that Egypt had deported five of the group to Sudan, saying only that the 23 who were registered as refugees or asylum-seekers with UNHCR were definitely still in Egypt (ref B). Now, however, he denied that Egypt had deported any of the group or any other Sudanese, even those who were not refugees or asylum-seekers. The decision was taken after protracted interagency discussions within the GoE, he said, which the MFA eventually "won." We asked if the GoE had informed UNHCR that these 48 were released, to which he replied "no" because "they did not ask."

Would-be Border Crossers Intimidated by Violent Incidents

13. (C) El Maaty claimed that news of violent clashes with Egyptian security forces on the border and tougher interrogations of Africans at Sinai check-points and Suez Canal crossings has caused would-be border crossers to think twice about making the attempt, tracking with UNHCR's previous claims that fewer Sudanese refugees or asylum-seekers were caught on the border in fall 2007 than in summer 2007 (ref C). Additionally, El Maaty said that the GoE was more aggressively going after smugglers, as well as migrants, noting that local press is publicizing altercations with smugglers as well as violent border incidents. Most recently, local press reported that on December 23, 2007 an

Egyptian guard was killed and 11 African migrants were arrested after guards clashed with smugglers escorting the Africans across the border.

¶4. (SBU) El Maaty noted that official GoE policy is to notify UNHCR any time a refugee or asylum-seeker is arrested, attempting to cross the border or anywhere else in Egypt. They are then tried and often set free, though some have been sent to prison, he said. However, Boutros Agot, a refugee from South Sudan who runs the Serving the Refugees and Community Organization, an NGO which serves poor Sudanese in Egypt, told us on February 10 that Egyptian police often do not have the training to recognize UNHCR refugee and asylum-seeker cards, causing delays and administrative problems referring the cases to UNHCR.

Sudanese Potential for Social Unrest

¶5. (SBU) El Maaty said that the GoE looks at Sudanese in Egypt, specifically South Sudanese, as potential "time-bombs" waiting to go off. They are welcome in Egypt, he said, but increasing gang activity among Sudanese youths has begun to raise concerns. Although gang violence has been mostly intra-Sudanese or targeted at other Africans (ref A), the security services are wary that violence could affect Egyptians. Most recently, Egyptian police arrested several Sudanese after intra-gang violence broke out on February 8 in the El Maadi suburb of Cairo, where gangs also vandalized cars on the street, according to Sudanese press.

¶6. (SBU) In addition to gang violence, Egyptian security services are on the alert for culture-based clashes between South Sudanese Christians and their Egyptian Muslim

CAIRO 00000281 002 OF 002

neighbors. "We do not want problems based on religion here."

Difficulties Repatriating South Sudanese

¶7. (SBU) El Maaty said that Egypt's goal is to encourage the large number of South Sudanese still resident in Egypt to return to South Sudan. Egypt would never forcibly deport South Sudanese, he said, but the GoE is working with the Cairo South Sudan Liaison Office and UNHCR to provide repatriation air transport to Juba, though the UNHCR continued to lack funding for this project (ref B). However, it is unclear that South Sudanese in Cairo, some of whom who have been here for years, would be willing to return. Agot said that poor Sudanese who have not found jobs in Egypt are eager to return to South Sudan, but those Sudanese who have managed to find work in Egypt generally do not want to return.

Comment

¶8. (C) El Maaty's assurances that none of the group of 48 were deported is welcome news, and we are working to independently verify it. It is worth noting, however, that this was the first meeting in which El Maaty strongly hinted that the use of violence by Egyptian security forces to intimidate would-be border crossers was an acceptable way to reduce crossing attempts.

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